

We claim:

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1. A multicast communication system comprising a plurality of subscriber locations, each subscriber location having an access device through which a number of subscriber devices access multicast information sent by a multicast distribution device, wherein each access device acts as a sole multicast receiver for its respective subscriber location and distributes multicast information received from the multicast distribution device to the subscriber devices at its respective subscriber location.
  2. The multicast communication system of claim 1, wherein the multicast distribution device distributes multicast information for a number of multicast groups, and wherein each access device uses a predetermined multicast group management protocol to join the multicast groups on behalf its respective subscriber devices.
  3. The multicast communication system of claim 2, wherein the predetermined multicast group management protocol is an Internet Group Management Protocol (IGMP).

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4. A multicast communication system comprising a multicast distribution device coupled to a plurality of subscriber locations, wherein each subscriber location is a separate subnetwork of the multicast distribution device.

5. The multicast communication system of claim 4, wherein each subscriber location comprises one and only one access device through which subscriber devices at the subscriber location access multicast information distributed by the multicast distribution device.

6. The multicast communication system of claim 5, wherein each access device is coupled to a separate interface of the multicast distribution device.

7. The multicast communication system of claim 6, wherein the multicast distribution device identifies each access device based upon the interface to which the access device is coupled.

8. The multicast communication system of claim 6, wherein each access device joins multicast groups maintained by the multicast distribution device on behalf of its respective subscriber devices using a multicast group management protocol.

9. The multicast communication system of claim 8, wherein the multicast distribution device sends multicast information to the access devices based upon multicast group memberships of the access devices.

10. The multicast communication system of claim 8, wherein each access device distributes multicast information received from the multicast distribution device to its respective subscriber devices.

11. The multicast communication system of claim 4, wherein the multicast distribution device maintains accounting information for each subnetwork.

13. The multicast communication system of claim 12, wherein the accounting information comprises a duration for each multicast group membership for each subnetwork.

14. The multicast communication system of claim 12, wherein the accounting information comprises a volume of multicast information for each multicast group membership for each subnetwork.

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15. In a communication system having a multicast distribution device coupled to a plurality of subscriber locations, each subscriber location having an access device and at least one subscriber device, an access control method comprising:

maintaining a number of multicast groups by the multicast distribution device; and  
joining one of said number of multicast groups by a first subscriber device, wherein joining one of said number of multicast groups by the first subscriber device comprises:

sending a first join request by the first subscriber device to an access device using a first multicast group management protocol;

joining the multicast group by the access device on behalf of the first subscriber device; and

associating the first subscriber device with the multicast group by the access device.

16. The access control method of claim 15, wherein joining the multicast group by the access device on behalf of the first subscriber device comprises:

sending a second join request by the access device to the multicast distribution device using a second multicast group management protocol; and

authenticating the access device by the multicast distribution device.

17. The access control method of claim 16, wherein authenticating the access device by the multicast distribution device comprises:

identifying the access device by the multicast distribution device.

18. The access control method of claim 17, wherein the access device is coupled to an interface of the multicast distribution device, and wherein identifying the access device by the multicast distribution device comprises:

identifying the access device based upon the interface over which the second join request is received by the multicast distribution device.

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19. The access control method of claim 16, wherein authenticating the access device by the multicast distribution device comprises:

authenticating the access device using a predetermined authentication scheme.

20. The access control method of claim 19, wherein the predetermined authentication scheme comprises IPsec AH.

21. The access control method of claim 16, further comprising:

determining by the multicast distribution device that the access device is authentic;

and

establishing a multicast group membership for the access device by the multicast distribution device.

22. The access control method of claim 16, further comprising:

determining by the multicast distribution device that the access device is not authentic; and

denying a multicast group membership for the access device by the multicast distribution device.

23. The access control method of claim 15, wherein associating the first subscriber device with the multicast group by the access device comprises:

maintaining by the access device a list of subscriber devices associated with the multicast group; and

adding the first subscriber device to the list of subscriber devices associated with the multicast group.

24. The access control method of claim 15, further comprising:

leaving the multicast group by the first subscriber device;

leaving the multicast group by the access device on behalf of the first subscriber device; and

25. The access control method of claim 15, further comprising:

sending a third join request by the second subscriber device to the access device using a third multicast group management protocol; and

26. The access control method of claim 25, further comprising:

remaining joined to the multicast group by the access device on behalf of the remaining subscriber device; and

27. The access control method of claim 15, further comprising:

maintaining accounting information by the multicast distribution device for each multicast group for each subscriber location.

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28. An apparatus for operating as a sole multicast receiver on behalf of a number of subscriber devices at a subscriber location in a multicast communication network, the apparatus comprising:

5 a network interface couplable to a multicast distribution device;  
a subscriber interface couplable to the number of subscriber devices at the subscriber location; and  
switching logic interposed between the network interface and the subscriber interface, wherein the switching logic is operably coupled to join multicast groups maintained by the multicast distribution device on behalf of the number of subscriber devices and forward multicast information to the subscriber devices.

10 29. The apparatus of claim 28, wherein the switching logic comprises:  
first multicast group management logic operably coupled to control first multicast group memberships between the apparatus and the subscriber devices;  
15 second multicast group management logic operably coupled to control second multicast group memberships between the apparatus and the multicast distribution device; and  
membership logic operably coupled to maintain said first and second multicast group memberships.

20 30. The apparatus of claim 29, wherein the first multicast group management logic comprises Internet Group Management Protocol (IGMP) logic for exchanging multicast group membership information with the subscriber devices.

25 31. The apparatus of claim 29, wherein the second multicast group management logic comprises Internet Group Management Protocol (IGMP) logic for exchanging multicast group membership information with the multicast distribution device.

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39. The apparatus of claim 38, wherein the second multicast group management logic is operably coupled to determine whether there are any remaining subscriber devices associated with the multicast group based upon the membership information maintained by the membership logic.



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41. The apparatus of claim 39, wherein the second multicast group management logic is operably coupled to leave the multicast group upon determining that there are no remaining subscriber devices associated with the multicast group.

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42. A computer program for controlling a computer system, the computer program comprising:

network interface logic for communicating with a multicast distribution device;

subscriber interface logic for communicating with a number of subscriber devices

at a subscriber location; and

switching logic logically interposed between the network interface logic and the subscriber interface logic, wherein the switching logic is programmed to join multicast groups maintained by the multicast distribution device on behalf of the number of subscriber devices and forward multicast information to the subscriber devices.

43. The computer program of claim 42, wherein the switching logic comprises:

first multicast group management logic programmed to control first multicast group memberships between the computer system and the subscriber devices;

second multicast group management logic programmed to control second multicast group memberships between the computer system and the multicast distribution device;

and

membership logic programmed to maintain said first and second multicast group memberships.

44. The computer program of claim 43, wherein the first multicast group management logic comprises Internet Group Management Protocol (IGMP) logic for exchanging multicast group membership information with the subscriber devices.

45. The computer program of claim 43, wherein the second multicast group management logic comprises Internet Group Management Protocol (IGMP) logic for exchanging multicast group membership information with the multicast distribution device.

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46. The computer program of claim 43, wherein the membership logic is programmed to associate the first multicast group memberships with the second multicast group memberships.

5 47. The computer program of claim 43, wherein the membership logic is programmed to maintain a list of subscriber devices for each of said second multicast group memberships.

10 48. The computer program of claim 43, wherein the first multicast group management logic is programmed to receive a join request from a subscriber device for joining a multicast group.

15 49. The computer program of claim 48, wherein the second multicast group management logic is programmed to join the multicast group on behalf of the first subscriber device.

20 50. The computer program of claim 48, wherein the membership logic is programmed to associate the first subscriber device with the multicast group.

25 51. The computer program of claim 43, wherein the first multicast group management logic is programmed to determine that a subscriber device has left a multicast group.

30 52. The computer program of claim 51, wherein the membership logic is programmed to disassociate the subscriber device from the multicast group.

53. The computer program of claim 52, wherein the second multicast group management logic is programmed to determine whether there are any remaining subscriber devices associated with the multicast group based upon the membership information maintained by the membership logic.

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57. The computer program of claim 42 embodied in a data signal.